Cool Water
by Dianne Warren

Reviewed by Bev Sandell Greenberg

Juliet, Saskatchewan, population 1100 — at first glance, a sleepy little hamlet where nothing much happens. In her luminous debut novel, author Dianne Warren begs to differ. In fact, the fictional village of Juliet is a close-knit rural community, the lives of its citizens rife with conflict and inextricably bound to each other.

A Regina writer, Warren has penned three books of short stories, including Bad Luck Dog, winner of the 1993 Saskatchewan Book of the Year Award, and A Reckless Moon, a Globe and Mail Best Book of 2002. Her play Serpent in the Night Sky was shortlisted for a 1992 Governor General’s Award. Warren has also won Western and National Magazine Awards for fiction. In 2004, she received the Marian Engel Award for a woman writer in mid-career.

The novel takes place over the course of twenty-four hours. At the outset, a young farmer, Lee Torgeson, chances upon a runaway Arabian stallion and takes it for a ride. As a child, he had heard of a hundred-mile horse race in the area surrounding Juliet, so he challenges himself to a similar undertaking. Along the way, he rides past the homes of several families. Not only are they experiencing problems, but their lives are also interconnected.

Written in elegant, understated prose, the narrative is presented in six parts, each featuring a series of vignettes. The first section introduces the main characters. The plot throbs to life after a few scandals are mentioned in the second part. Part three focuses on the interconnections among the characters. The final three sections expand the conflicts and to some extent resolve them.

Warren demonstrates in this novel her extensive knowledge about rural life, including horses and the economics of farming. Though the village of Juliet is portrayed in a positive light, the family farm is a dying enterprise in Saskatchewan. In fact, this
notion forms the basis for much of the ongoing conflict in the novel — the Dolson family’s loss of their farm and Lee’s decision to forsake university in order to maintain his late father’s farm.

At several junctures, Warren showcases the beauty of the rural Saskatchewan landscape. In one of the opening chapters, we view the land through the eyes of an outsider who has recently arrived in the area. “The landscape was so vast and simple, reduced to sky and grass and sand. Yet in the surface at her feet, she saw patterns as intricate and complicated as the veins in an insect’s wings” (306).

Warren excels in her delineation of the characters, their impetuousness often echoing the theme of her short-story collection *A Reckless Moon*. Members of the Dolson family are prime examples of such behaviour; the scenes in which Vicki spends the day with her six children are hilarious as well as poignant. Another vignette about Blaine’s dalliance with a construction site flag girl crackles with intensity.

Even Juliet’s most affluent citizen, bank manager Norval Birch, occasionally displays a sense of recklessness in his decisions; he is riddled with guilt about his inability to prevent farm foreclosures.

*Cool Water* is an ode to rural Saskatchewan and the struggles of its population. Readers will undoubtedly enjoy Warren’s keen insights and compassionate account of small-town life in her beloved province.

Bev Sandell Greenberg is a Winnipeg writer and editor.

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